

Popular Nomenclature

EDITOR OF 'THE AUK':

The question of nomenclature has been so persistent recently here, there and everywhere, that I trust you will pardon me for touching on this controversial subject once again. It is not to the scientific names that I wish to make reference, but to the popular ones. Mr. Ernest Thompson Seton has recently expressed his views on this subject both in the columns of 'The Auk' (April, 1919, Vol. XXXVI, pp. 229-235) and in those of the 'Journal of Mammalogy' (Feb., 1920, Vol. I, pp. 104 & 105). Since Mr. Seton draws a clear line of demarkation between the scientific and the field student and presumably puts forth the views of the latter in his articles, I trust you will also find the space for the views of a scientific student. Not that I have ever before considered myself as such, for the majority of my published papers have been on field work pure and simple, but my views differ so fundamentally from those of Mr. Seton, that I now think I must belong to the class he designates as scientific.

Mr. Seton advocates a system by which popular names should be fixed entirely by popular taste and sentiment. It is an excellent principle but cannot be achieved, so it seems to me, if Mr. Seton's attitude be generally adopted. If a line must be drawn between the scientific and the field student, and in these days such a line seems more artificial than real, the problems of popular nomenclature can never be solved by an antagonistic attitude, but by one of frank co-operation. If the rules of priority, which have been carefully formulated by international experts are to be ignored by those, be they field men or otherwise, who personally disagree with them, a rational nomenclature, scientific or popular, can never be arrived at.

The reason I am re-opening the popular side of the question is this. In the last issue of 'Country Life' (March, 1920) there are two illustrated articles on the Sparrow Hawk. The one is entitled "Falconry" (pp. 68 & 69), the other merely the "Sparrow Hawk" (p. 156 et seq.). Throughout the articles no other name than Sparrow Hawk is given to the respective subjects, but on glancing at the photographs accompanying them one notices at once that each is dealing with a completely different bird. The first relates to the British Sparrow Hawk, *ACCIPITER NISUS*, the second to the American Sparrow Hawk, *FALCO SPARVERIUS*. The photographs are good and must be puzzling in the extreme to those geniuses of language who are ignorant of the existence of countries other than North America, whom Mr. Seton extols throughout his paper.

How the little falcon known in this country as the Sparrow Hawk ever came by this absurd misnomer is too late in the day to argue about. The fact remains and must be faced. If Mr. Seton's system is allowed to take its course such muddles as this must continue indefinitely. As he rightly contends the name is one now pleasing to and understood by the popular

mind and will have to remain in use. No efforts of the scientist can eradicate it. Yet there is a solution to the problem and a very simple one—by the use of the prefix “American.” There is no doubt that ACCIPITER NISUS was known by the name of Sparrow Hawk before FALCO SPARVERIUS received it and therefore by the rules of priority and common sense the latter should be modified to “American Sparrow Hawk.” It is the only way of saving such an absurd situation as has arisen in the last number of ‘Country Life.’ It is all very well to argue as Mr. Seton does “that the genius of language does not know of the existence of South America or concern itself with priority or with anything but getting the idea into the mind and memory.” Such an argument is too restricted to be of value. The genius of language may devise the name of Sparrow Hawk, but surely it will not be too difficult for him to learn and remember that another genius of language in another country (even if he has to be informed of its existence) discovered this name a century or two earlier and applied it to a different bird and therefore the word American will have to be prefixed to his Sparrow Hawk to distinguish it from the original. Earlier in his letter Mr. Seton mentions the Robin and states without comment that “actually even the scientific lists give the bird as *Ameri-an* Robin.” (The italics are mine). Here he takes an example in which the rules of priority have been tacitly acknowledged by the use of the prefix “American” and acclaims the result, but he then proceeds to deprecate this only possible way of arriving at a satisfactory popular nomenclature. The principles of priority may primarily concern the scientific student but they cannot be ignored by the field worker. They are fundamental. There is no doubt that the names now firmly fixed in the popular mind will have to stand, but there is no reason why in the case of the many birds that have names in use in other countries, if these latter have priority, the American species should not be differentiated by the use of the prefix “American.” It has been done in the case of the Robin. It should likewise be done in all other cases.

I feel that I am unduly trespassing on your space, but there is one other point to which I should like to call attention. Mr. Seton gives a number of very interesting examples of birds that have several popular names all well established in the districts in which they are respectively used. If standard books would give a list of these recognized names instead of attempting to eradicate them in favor of a single one and give to the one in most general use the most prominent place, the book would be of universal value. In a country the size of North America it is only reasonable to expect that a bird should have more than one popular name. Even in England, small as it is, many of the people in the north do not know what is meant if a southern name be applied to some of their commonest birds. As Mr. Seton points out, Doctor Elliot Coues hit upon this plan. It has been followed by one or two other authors, e. g., Mr. Bailey in his ‘Birds of Virginia’ and Mr. Taverner in his ‘Birds of Eastern Canada.’

If the scheme were generally adopted, the list being restricted to names that are really and truly well known, the genius of language should be taught to take his choice rather than to be encouraged to increase confusion by the invention of more names. The plan has been widely and successfully used in other countries. It should succeed equally well here.

I fear this letter sounds as if I had a quarrel with Mr. Seton. Far from it. He has, however, put his views strongly. I have followed suit.

WM. ROWAN (M. Sc., M. B. O. U.)

University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, April 4, 1920.

EDITOR OF 'THE AUK':

Various aspects of the English language nomenclature of the A. O. U. 'Check-List' have recently been given publicity by prominent ornithologists, and the desirability of some changes has been made apparent.

When the first edition of the 'Check-List' was being prepared, the terms "Junco" and "Vireo" were adopted, in preference respectively to the terms "Snowbird" and "Greenlet," as the result of an appeal to the readers of 'The Auk', made through its pages. The wisdom of the choice made at that time in accordance with the majority of the preferences expressed in answer to the appeal has been well proven in the succeeding years. Could not a similar appeal now be made in the expectation of equally happy results?

It is suggested that the five propositions stated hereunder, intended to apply only to the standard "common" names of the birds included in the 'Check-List,' be submitted to the readers of 'The Auk' for expressions of opinion, each proposition to be considered separately, and that any of them which may be favored by a majority of the replies received be applied in the revision of the "common" nomenclature of the 'Check-List.' While the writer personally favors the application of each and all of these propositions, he would make clear that he is not here directly urging their adoption, but merely their submission to the judgment of the entire personnel of the A. O. U.

Proposition 1. *Each species shall be given a name which shall be distinct and applicable to the species as a whole, and the names of the subspecies, if any, into which the species may be divided shall each consist of the name of the species with an appropriate modifying term prefixed.*

This is merely the logical application of trinomial nomenclature to "common" names. At present the English-language names of the 'Check-List' do not properly indicate the difference between species and subspecies and in this respect they are neither scientifically accurate nor practically convenient. We have "Yellow Palm Warbler" as an equivalent of *Dendroica palmarum hypochrysea* and "Palm Warbler" as an equivalent of *D. p. palmarum*, but we have no English-language equivalent of the species name, *D. palmarum*. The result is to contribute to what Dr.

Dwight has termed "the exaltation of the subspecies" and to prevent exact reference in English to a subdivided species without awkward circumlocution. Mr. P. A. Taverner, who has applied the principle of this proposition to the names used in his recent 'Birds of Eastern Canada,' suggests the extension of "Palm Warbler" to indicate the entire species and the adoption of the name "Interior Palm Warbler" for *D. p. palmarum*, which is a fair example of the type of changes which would be brought about by the acceptance of the proposition.

Proposition 2. *Clumsy descriptive names shall not be introduced and, where such are already authorized, they shall be replaced by appropriate shorter names.*

This is but an expression of a tendency which has long been apparent. "Blue Yellow-backed Warbler" has given place to "Parula Warbler," "Bay-winged Grass Bunting" has yielded to "Vesper Sparrow," and we are well satisfied with the changes; why should not "Black-throated Green Warbler" be discarded in favor of "Vee Warbler," "Canada Sparrow" be substituted for "White-throated Sparrow," and similar changes take place where needed throughout the 'Check-List?' The acceptance of Proposition 2 would render much more satisfactory the application of Proposition 1.

Proposition 3. *Adjectival parts of names which give a wholly erroneous idea of the bird named shall be replaced by others more in keeping with the known facts.*

There does not appear to be any reason for retaining "Connecticut" Warbler, "Nashville Warbler," "Tree" Sparrow, and other poorly chosen terms, except the fact that they are now in use. Appropriate names authorized in these cases by the 'Check-List' would quickly become current and supplant the misnomers.

Proposition 4. *The name of a human being shall not be used as the English-language name of a bird, and any such names at present authorized shall be replaced by other appropriate terms.*

Even the coining of scientific names from the names of men is a yielding to human weakness which can be justified, if at all, only on the ground that a name is a name only and does not necessarily mean anything. This justification is not applicable to English-language names, each of which should mean much about the species to which it appertains. In the case of many existing bird names derived from human names there is no pretense of a real connection between the bird and the particular human being for whom it is named, but in any case the connection between a short-lived human *individual* and a *species* whose life is of indefinitely great duration must be relatively so small as to afford no sound basis for attempting to give the species in perpetuity the name of the individual. "Wilson's Thrush" has been happily replaced by "Veery"; why cannot "Wilson's Warbler" be bettered?

Proposition 5. *Where a term is used as the name or the principal part of the name of more than one species it shall, in the case of each species concerned, be accompanied by a distinguishing modifier.*

At present *Penthestes carolinensis carolinensis* is called "Carolina Chickadee" and *P. atricapillus atricapillus* is called simply "Chickadee." This may serve passably well where but one species of Chickadee occurs, but where the ranges of two species overlap it causes confusion and many departures from the English-language nomenclature of the 'Check-List.' It is to prevent such occurrences that an application of Proposition 5 is suggested.

It may be noted that, in the example cited, to revert to "Black-capped Chickadee," as is often done, would not be in accordance with Proposition 2. Some other suitable name, such as "Cheery Chickadee," could be decided on for *P. a. atricapillus*.

In their able handling of the scientific nomenclature of the 'Check-List' the A. O. U. Committee are guided by their Code, but no such Code exists for the English-language nomenclature, which should be arranged as far as possible in accordance with the wishes of the majority of the bird students in Canada and the United States. These are the people who use this nomenclature; their judgment concerning it can be trusted; and without their approbation it cannot remain truly standard. By submitting the above propositions, or others of similar import, to the readers of 'The Auk' for their decisions, the Committee will obtain for its guidance in preparing a new edition of the 'Check-List' the consensus of opinion of the great body of well-informed American ornithologists, bird students, and bird lovers.

HARRISON F. LEWIS

P. O. Box, No. 6, Quebec, P. Q., May 21, 1920.

[The foregoing communications on popular names open up a question of far greater general interest than that of technical nomenclature, to which so much space is devoted in ornithological literature, and deserve the most careful consideration. Fortunately we have not and cannot have a code covering the use of popular names. Any attempt in this direction, such as is suggested in Mr. Lewis's propositions 2-4, will merely create a set of "book names" which no one but certain pedantic writers will use. Popular usage makes our popular names and while they may sometimes be coined arbitrarily and meet with general acceptance this is rarely the case. As regards the attempts of the A. O. U. Committee in this direction the name "Vesper Sparrow" quoted by Mr. Lewis was a success because it was already in general use in defiance of the books; but "Snowflake" and "Dovekie" proposed at the same time were failures and were not taken up in popular usage, so that the former was rejected in the last edition of the 'Check-List' in favor of the former name "Snow Bunting" and the latter should similarly have reverted to "Little Auk." Mr.

Lewis must have, we think, much more faith in the power of the 'Check-List' than have its compilers if he thinks that it could influence general usage in such matters.

What we have said is applicable to all names, not only those denoting birds or other natural objects. We cannot enforce upon the public what the public will not have, as witness the failure of the advocates of "motion picture" as against "moving-picture," and we may see the day when "movie" will be the recognized word in our dictionaries.

Propositions such as Mr. Lewis advocates while all very well in theory would produce a set of English names but not a set of popular names, and the ornithologist who would be expected to use them surely has troubles enough as it is in the matter of names without adding to his burdens.

In these remarks it will be seen that I am in the main endorsing the attitude of Mr. Rowan and it would probably be well to follow his suggestion of giving several popular names in the 'Check-List' where there are several in general use, though the Committee would probably be criticised for errors of omission and favoritism if they made such a selection.

As to the addition of the word American to distinguish certain of our birds from English species bearing the same popular name, I cannot agree with Mr. Rowan. This practise was followed in the earlier editions of the 'Check-List' but was deliberately abolished in 1910 even in the case of the Robin. The reason for this action was that the Committee recognized in these names just such book-names as I have referred to above. Nobody thinks for a moment of calling our bird anything but Robin and we shall continue to call it so, all the check-lists and ornithologies to the contrary. It would seem quite as unnecessary to insist upon printing the name of our bird "American Robin" as it would to try to compel our British friends to call their bird "English Robin" whenever they refer to it. Americans will, it is true, use this name when they refer to the English bird just as the English will call our bird "American Robin" but to each in his own country the respective birds are simply Robins, and they will continue to be called so just as various identical household implements are given entirely different names by the English speaking people on the two sides of the Atlantic. The Sparrow Hawk case cited by Mr. Rowan is simply an illustration of editorial ignorance and distinctive terms should of course be used in print wherever ambiguity exists.

There it seems to us more justice in the claim of some of our western ornithologists that the "Eastern" Robin should be so designated in contrast with the "Western Robin" on the grounds that one is no more "the" Robin than the other. If we are to have any book-names let them be of this kind with the understanding, however, that in popular usage the geographical prefix in each case is to be dropped.

Mr. Lewis's fifth proposition is well taken. Where we have two kinds of any group of birds inhabiting the same region the unadorned name rarely serves as a term for either one of them. "Chickadee" as he says

is not distinctive as compared with 'Carolina Chickadee' and where the two occur we have to use the qualifying term "Black-capped" for the former. This is done now in spite of the 'Check-List' and the sooner this name is incorporated in the volume the better. So too "Crossbill" which lost its qualifying name "American" at the same time that the Robin did, is unsatisfactory and ambiguous and consequently in popular usage and in not a few publications it appears, as it should, "Red Crossbill." So too "Water-Thrush" should be officially as it is popularly called "Northern Water-Thrush" and there are doubtless others. In some cases however, there seems to have been no ambiguity as "Palm" and "Yellow-Palm" Warbler but these may also be changed if it is thought better.

Mr. Lewis's proposition concerning the consistent naming of a species and its component sub-species has already been discussed in these columns. While granting the need of some collective heading such as he suggests we do not think what the use of a word in the singular for the collective concept embracing all of the subspecies of a species will be anything but ambiguous. The word "Song-Sparrow" and "*Melospiza melodia*" have been used so long, and are still used, to denote the eastern race alone that we cannot now use the same terms to denote the whole assemblage of Song Sparrows. A better plan and one which we hope to see adopted in the next edition of the 'Check-List' has been suggested: namely to use the plural name "Song-Sparrows" for the complex *Melospiza melodia*.

After all, as stated at the outset, popular nomenclature is radically different from technical nomenclature and we must follow popular usage rather than try to arbitrarily influence it, even though we be not consistent.

WITMER STONE.]

Procellaria vittata Forster is not Halobaena caerulea Gmelin.

EDITOR OF 'THE AUK':

In the 'Proc. Biol. Soc. Wash.,' Vol. 32, p. 201, Dec. 31, 1919, Mr. H. C. Oberholser has claimed that *Procellaria vittata* was given by Forster to the bird now known as *Halobaena caerulea* Gmelin, and as it was published prior to the latter it should replace it.

Apparently Mr. Oberholser's contention is based upon the information provided by myself in the 'Birds of Australia,' and as his conclusion is incorrect, I here re-state the facts as clearly as possible so that no future misapprehension may arise.

Forster accompanied Cook on his second voyage round the world as naturalist and his son George was with him as painter. The elder Forster, whose initials are J. R., considered himself entitled to publish the results of the voyage, but the Admiralty who had engaged him did not agree with that view when his engagement concluded and definitely for-